

"We're humans not heroes": Exploring healthcare workers experiences of COVID-19 through arts-based research.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been described as “the biggest challenge the health and care system has faced in living memory” (Charles and Ewbank 2020). In particular, it has resulted in unprecedented circumstances for healthcare workers including changes in role, rapid uptake of new policies and procedures as well as events and decisions causing moral distress and moral injury (Walton et al. 2020). The research explores healthcare worker experiences of working through the COVID-19 pandemic: We examine healthcare worker definitions of the situation, experiences of workplace compassion and compassionate leadership during the pandemic period, how the healthcare role is entwined with identity and healthcare worker perspectives on terms ‘hero’ and ‘second victim’ as well as the challenging events that healthcare workers have faced. A publication of this research is forthcoming.

In this study, participants shared their narratives via a creative workshop. This creative workshop was led by a writer and a theatre producer and embodied themes from research into workplace compassion (Clyne et al. 2018). Shared narratives led to the development of the script for this audio art piece ‘Boats on an Ocean’ exhibited here. In the research paper, seven themes were identified, six of which relate to experiences of working through the pandemic period. For example, the uncertainty and fear experienced by healthcare workers and the importance of human connection and interpersonal aspects of workplace compassion featured strongly throughout the data. These findings then led to the development of recommendations outlining how compassionate healthcare leaders should behave. These are incorporated in the linked interactive resource (scan QR code). In addition, we found that a shift in focus is needed to value healthcare workers as individuals rather than as ‘heroes’ or ‘victims.’ The seventh theme related to participant reflections on the creative process, which participants described as “cathartic” and said it encouraged them to attach meaning to their experiences. As well as recommendations for healthcare leaders at all levels, future plans include relationship building between arts and healthcare organisations. Future research could also usefully further explore healthcare worker experiences of working during the COVID-19 Pandemic to inform the development of effective support provision in this area.

